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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 004827

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [XF](#) [XA](#) [XG](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL ISLAM IN JORDAN: OPPOSITION MOSTLY FROM WITHIN THE SYSTEM

REF: SECSTATE 205815

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

BACKGROUND: ISLAM JORDANIAN STYLE

1. (C) Political Islam is a mostly moderate force in Jordanian society. By far, the most important Islamic organization in Jordan is the Muslim Brotherhood, and then its political arm, the Islamic Action Front. There are no other Islamic groups in the country that match the MB/IAF in influence and size. However, by and large, political and social associations in Jordan are mostly tribal-based rather than religion-based, and as the recent Parliamentary elections showed, tribal affiliations remain the most influential factor in Jordanian politics. There are several Islamic-run charities in Jordan, but unlike Islamic charities in other parts of the region, these charities do not provide services for many in the population. There is a small minority of al-Qa'ida-influenced extremists in Jordan, but the GOJ has and continues to take a very aggressive tack in dealing with Islamic extremism.

2. (C) Answers below are keyed to Reftel paras:

4) Post has provided below a thumbnail sketch of the following influential organizations/individuals active in Political Islam in Jordan:

Muslim Brotherhood (MB)--The Jordan branch of the MB originally began in 1945 as an offshoot of the Egyptian MB, but it has never evolved into a violent or subversive group. The MB has a history of cooperation with the GOJ and enjoyed a special status under King Hussein's reign. The King allowed the MB to categorize itself as an Islamic society during a time when political parties were banned in Jordan, and as such, the MB was able to develop its organizational structure and influence while other political movements were forced underground. During the last 40 years, the MB has promoted its political beliefs via its control over professional associations, and through its social activities, relatively modest welfare programs and media efforts. Elements of the GOJ responsible for monitoring religious extremists are concerned that the ultimate aims of the MB are more radical than the organization's stated policy and that there may be links between MB members and more extremist organizations. The current leadership of the MB, headed by East Banker Abdul Majid Thneibat, is dominated by moderates, however there is a movement within the organization towards a more radical public line.

Islamic Action Front (IAF)-- The IAF was established as the political party representing the MB in 1992. MB leaders created the IAF because they did not want to jeopardize the MB's special status as a social society. The IAF is the only functioning political party in Jordan. With several thousand members and an effective campaign machinery, the IAF won 17 seats out of 110 in the recent elections and will likely be able to attract several other sympathetic Parliamentarians to form the largest (but still minority) political bloc in Parliament. Its current leader is a moderate East Banker, IAF Secretary General Hamza Mansour. Although Mansour has made numerous provocative and inciteful public statements, within the organization he has called for cooperation with the government, participation in the elections, and contacts with foreign embassies (including the U.S.)

Islamic Centrist Party--Roughly 120 IAF members who promoted a more pluralistic and liberal agenda broke away from the IAF in 2001 to form their own party, the Islamic Centrist Party. The party's platform includes promoting the role of women in society, tolerance and economic reform. However, so far the party's popular support has been limited and it won no seats in the recent Parliamentary elections. The party

is run by Secretary General Atef Btoush.

Islamic Center Society--Probably the largest and most established charity run by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamic Center Society runs a number of health clinics, secondary schools, and at least two hospitals and underwrites these services for the poor.

Takfir wa Hijra (Mohammad Shalabi)--A radical offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Takfir wa Hijra (aka Takfiris) follow an extreme fundamentalist version of Islam. The GOJ has labeled a group of Ma'an-based extremists, led by Mohammad Shalibi, aka Abu Sayyaf, as Takfiris, although Shalibi denied any connection to the Takfiris in a public interview in November 2002. The GOJ moved against the group in November 2002 in the city of Ma'an. The crackdown resulted in the deaths of several GOJ security officials and Shalabi followers, but Shalabi's current whereabouts are unknown.

4a) Parties/groups that advocate and seek a violent overthrow of existing regimes, and express overt hostility to political and religious pluralism, and to secular and minority groups: Shalabi and his followers, loosely termed Takfir wa Hijra by the GOJ, would fall under this category. Also in this category, are an unknown number of local-based extremists who are associated with al-Qa'ida or followers of al-Qa'ida associate Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Several of Zarqawi's associates were arrested in December 2002 for the assassination of US diplomat Laurence Foley and are currently on trial for his murder.

4b) Parties/groups who are anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic, and who seek the overthrow of existing regimes though not necessarily by violence: Hizb al-Tahrir, an organization that professes to advocate non-violent Islamic revolution, has an unknown number of followers in Jordan.

4c) Parties/groups that are willing to engage in a democratic, pluralistic process but who, if given full power, would not respect the rights of non-Islamists, secularists, and/or minorities: Some members of the Islamic Action Front and Muslim Brotherhood would probably fit this category. The IAF if given full power would likely support some laws that would infringe upon the rights of others, including the banning of alcohol, gender segregation in schools, and mandatory use of the hejab for women.

4d) Parties/groups who engage in a democratic, pluralistic process and who do/would respect the rights of others as well as the principle of alternance of government: The IAF/MB mostly fit into this category as they have historically worked with other parties/minority groups within the political system. They have also cooperated with the GOJ--to the extent of circumscribing their own activities when the GOJ has established parameters for their activities.

5) Post would not advocate assistance programs to IAF or MB members. Public statements attributed to the MB have at times appeared to favor terrorist acts against Israel and/or resistance to the US in Iraq.

6a) How are effective groups organized? What makes them effective? What lessons could secular groups in the same countries learn from the Islamists?

-- The MB is the most effective Islamic group in Jordan, while the IAF is the most effective political party in Jordan. Their effectiveness is based on broad grassroots appeal, commitment to a set of common causes, and strong organizational and financial support from its members. The IAF has been effective in using the media to promote its message, principally through the publication of "Al Sabeel", Jordan's highest circulation weekly newspaper.

What part of the population or potential electorate could/do listed groups control individually and collectively?

-- The MB and IAF's appeal is broad and attracts both East Bank and West Bank constituents. Prior to changes in the electoral law, the MB was able to garner about 27 percent (22 of 80) of the Parliamentary seats in the 1989 elections. In the June 2003 elections, the IAF won a total of 17 seats (out of 110), despite expectations that the group would win at least 20-22 seats. A pollster from the Center for Strategic Studies at Jordan University recently told us

that, based on unreleased polling data, he believes the MB/IAF receives the support of about 15 percent of the population. MB influence in the professional associations is much more dominant. MB members usually dominate poorly-attended elections and thereby control the leadership in the most important associations, including the engineering and medical associations.

Do listed groups pursue a largely domestic or internationalist agenda? Do they receive funding or other support from foreign governments or groups?

-- The MB/IAF pursue a mostly domestic agenda with one exception: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Almost since its inception, the MB has pursued an anti-Israeli agenda and rallied opposition to the Jordan-Israeli peace treaty. The MB and the IAF are leaders of anti-normalization campaigns in Jordan. Post knows of no foreign government funding or support to the MB or IAF. The GOJ monitors the MB and IAF closely and would likely block any such support from foreign sources. We would point out that most Jordanians view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a domestic--and not international--issue.

Do these groups view the shari'ah as the immutable seventh-century version or as an elastic body of guidance able to evolve to fit contemporary circumstances?

-- While public statements are steeped in shari'ah, in practicality, the MB and IAF in Parliament, and when in government in the early 1990s, have a more pragmatic approach to Islamic issues, particularly with implementation of shari'ah-mandated criminal punishments.

Do host nations have any prominent Islamic "modernizers"? If so, are they associated with listed groups? Antagonistic toward the groups?

-- The MB and IAF are comparatively moderate entities in the context of the spectrum of regional Islamic political movements. Both organizations are controlled by the East Bank leaders, who traditionally have had close ties to the regime.

What role, if any, do listed groups play in intra-Islamic debates?

-- MB members are often invited and have attended regional Islamic meetings, some of which have involved more radical Islamists. Post does not know the extent to which MB members participate in the dialogue at these meetings.

Do listed groups show any willingness to cooperate politically or practically with non-Islamic parties/groups?

-- Both the IAF and Islamic Centrist Party have worked with non-Islamic blocs in Parliament to achieve common goals. The IAF has had a pragmatic approach to working with non-Islamic parties, and even Christians on occasion. The Islamic Centrist Party, before Parliament was dismissed in June 2001, called on some 30 other political parties--representing a broad political spectrum--to join it in creating a new Parliamentary bloc. However, Parliament was dismissed before it could consolidate the new bloc.

What is the attitude of listed groups toward the U.S.? With groups opposed to the U.S., is opposition grounded mainly in disagreement with U.S. policy or in anti-Westernism more generally?

-- Post notes that disagreements with the IAF/MB date back to a couple of incidents, prior to the start of the al-Aqsa Intifada, involving revoked visas for senior IAF/MB leaders, who had previously enjoyed 5-year, multiple entry visas to the U.S. Prior to the visas issue, the Embassy had regular--if not close--contact with leaders of the MB and IAF. The start of the al-Aqsa Intifada led to the further disintegration of relations. However, in July 2002, Hamza Mansour, the leader of the IAF, agreed to meet with R Special Coordinator Christopher Ross for which he endured some tough internal criticism. The IAF/MB have refused to meet with Embassy officials since July 2002, and both groups have declined invitations to Embassy events. MB/IAF criticism is mostly limited to statements against U.S. support for Israel, perceived U.S. efforts to "normalize" Jordanian-Israeli relations, alleged lack of U.S. support for Palestine, and U.S. policy in Iraq.

GNEHM